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ABSTRACT

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Parent-Teacher Partnerships: A Theoretical Approach for Teachers

Carol R. Keyes

Abstract

Noting the importance of the parent-teacher relationship to maintaining good home-school partnerships, this paper discusses the research on parent-teacher partnerships, including factors that affect the development of effective relationships: (1) the degree of match between teachers' and parents' cultures and values, (2) societal forces at work on family and school, and (3) how teachers and parents view their roles. The paper then presents a theoretical framework that teachers can use to enhance parent-teacher partnerships. This framework is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective, Getzels' social systems perspective, Katz's and Hoover and Dempsey's work on the role of parents, and Epstein's typology of parental involvement.

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> It's a dance, a dance between teacher and student and parent and child and parent and teacher and so on. Knowing when to respond and when to let go and let them find out on their own is a dance, a subtle communication of letting each other know what our needs are and how we can help each other. Interview, teacher (Henry, 1996, p. 182)

While the value of the home/school partnership is universally accepted, it is not always easy to promote or maintain.[1] As we have moved from small communities with intimate connections to a very diverse mobile culture, the increasing complexity of relationships, roles, and functions has often complicated the collaborations. This paper focuses on teachers' responsibilities in the parent-teacher partnership, and although the partnership needs to be a two-way dynamic to work, "teachers are really the glue that holds the home/school partnerships together" (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 1999, p. 36).

The paper is organized into two parts. In the first part is a review of the literature related to parent-teacher partnerships. In the second part, I propose a theoretical framework through which teachers can enhance parent-teacher partnerships.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

Most teachers think about having a good relationship with parents. However, just as images of teaching and learning environments vary, so do images of "good" parent-teacher relationships. At one end of the spectrum, the image of a good relationship is an effective separation of roles and functions between home and school, an optimal social distance combined with mutual respect. The family meets the school's expectations efficiently, and the school effectively educates the child without undue demands on the home (Henry, 1996; Epstein, 1995; Powell, 1989; Lortie, 1975). At the other end of the spectrum is the image of the school functioning as an extended family, a more open system. Family and school intersect around the life of the child (Powell, 1989; Galinsky, 1977; Taylor, 1968).

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As teachers think about their work with parents and families, they often have mixed feelings. There are good feelings of shared efforts and mutually valued achievement with some parents; while with others, there is a sense of frustration, helplessness, or even anger over conflicting perceptions and understandings. The degree of success that teachers have in developing a partnership with parents depends heavily on the "fit" between parental cares and concerns and those of the teacher. Unlike many other kinds of relationships in people's lives, the parent-teacher pairing occurs by assignment rather than choice. The common interest is the schooling of a child. What *all* good parent-teacher relationships have in common is the "absence of conflict." Optimally this absence of conflict is due to a presence of mutual trust and respect; less optimally, it is due to the absence of caring.

Factors That Affect the Development of Effective Relationships

There are a number of factors that affect a teacher's ability to develop a smooth parent-teacher partnership. Some of these factors pose problems, and the challenge is how to develop an effective working relationship in spite of the problems that may be present. The factors include (1) the degree of match between teachers' and parents' cultures and values, (2) societal forces at work on family and school, and (3) how teachers and parents view their roles.

The Degree of Match between Teachers' and Parents' Cultures and Values

In today's mobile world, it is less likely that parents and teachers will hold beliefs and values that are closely matched compared to previous generations. In earlier times, teachers lived in the communities with families, and there was a "natural bridge" between family and school (Hymes, 1974). Now parents and teachers share the community less frequently; teachers do not have the same sense of belonging to the community that they did when they lived in the same town. Teachers often come from a socioeconomic class, race, or ethnic group that is different from the children they teach. Differences in these realms are associated with different interactional styles and language systems, as well as values, and present challenges to developing effective partnerships (Burke, 1999; Langdon & Novak, 1998; Henry, 1996).

Teachers' own backgrounds are a key factor in how they relate to parents (Sturm, 1997; Solity, 1995). A classroom teacher's experience highlights the influence of background and the challenges to re-creating a bridge. Participating in a teacher group discussion of intercultural communication, a teacher wrote (as if realizing it for the first time):

> Culture means more than holidays and food; it includes all of the subtle patterns of communication, verbal and nonverbal, that people use every day. I noticed how easily I valued cultural diversity in the abstract or in the form of occasional holidays yet how readily I rejected cultural differences when they appeared in the form of parents' different approaches to child rearing. (Sturm, 1997, p. 34)

She went on to write about the group's reflection:

> We realized that unexamined values, beliefs, and patterns of interaction learned when we were children exert a powerful influence on our communication and care giving routines. Our sincere intentions didn't prevent us from rejecting parents' diverse values when they challenged our own cherished beliefs. We were often unable to set aside our own cultural values long enough to listen to parents. (Sturm, 1997, p. 35)

From the parents' perspective, some of the factors that influence a degree of openness include (1) cultural beliefs related to the authoritative position of teachers that prevent parents from expressing their concerns, (2) a lack of education that may cause parents to be intimidated in interactions with teachers, (3) language differences that may result in parents feeling uncomfortable if no one speaks their language, and (4) different socioeconomic levels that may result in child-rearing practices and values that conflict with those of the teachers (Keyes, 1995; Greenberg, 1989).

If there is a consistent match between teacher and family cultures and values, the probabilities are greater for developing effective professional skills in

working with parents over time. In contrast, the greater the discontinuities, the more effort that is needed to promote a partnership (Lightfoot, 1978).

Societal Forces at Work on Families and Schools

The breadth of changes in society is well documented. Among these changes are the increasing reliance on technology, the changing nature of work, a more diverse population, and a more service-oriented society. For the purpose of this paper, the concern is how such forces affect schools and families. As we think about building bridges to support parent-teacher partnerships, it is critical to keep these forces in mind.

In addition to what was at one time the "traditional" two-parent family, we now have two-parent working families, single-parent families, adoptive families, and remarried or blended families, to cite just a few of the new family constellations. Family roles have also become more flexible and fluid. Mothers may function in what was once the traditional role of fathers, fathers may function as homemakers, and children may perform some parental functions for siblings. Thus, the school does not necessarily have access to a consistent adult to speak for the family. Sometimes it's one parent; other times it's a different parent from a blended family; and at still other times, it may be a sister, brother, or aunt—making effective communication a real challenge.

As far back as 1950, it was understood that parents and teachers had multiple responsibilities and pressing time demands:

> As we work with parents, it is especially important that we not forget the complexities of family life. When we see a tired youngster coming to school, we may want to shake the parents and make them read a good article about children's need for sleep. It is easy to forget—or maybe we never knew—that at home three children sleep in one bed while mother and father sleep in the same room with them. We put pressure on parents to come to school meetings as if these were the only true important events of the day. But parents, even very good parents who care deeply for their children, have shopping to do, floors to scrub, hair that must be washed, and often have tired feet and aching backs.... You have to avoid the error of seeing life only from the school's side as if homes simply flowed along smoothly with no problems of their own. The closer you move to parents the more realistic your expectations become.... Each family has their private story of how it lives its present days. (Hymes, 1974, pp. 5, 17)

Twenty-nine years later, the responsibilities and time demands are still present:

> But whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on role demand, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings. As we shall see, parents' evaluations of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their child, are related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, the presence of friends or neighbors who can help out in large and small emergencies, the quality of health, social services, and neighborhood safety. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7)

Both parents and teachers experience job stress. For parents, the number of hours they work, the amount of job autonomy and job demands, and relationships with supervisors affect their other relationships. For teachers, the job stress also is affected by the number of hours worked, schedules, amount of autonomy, role ambiguity, physical demands of the job, and clarity of the program (Galinsky, 1988). Teaching is physically and emotionally exhausting, and reaching out to parents is sometimes viewed as one more burdensome task. So, in fact, both parties to the relationship are buffeted by strains and tensions in their worlds.

How Teachers and Parents View Their Roles

> More than half a century ago, Willard Waller (1932) observed that parents and teachers are "natural enemies." The basis of his argument was that parents and teachers maintain qualitatively different relationships with the same child, especially in regard to affective bonds and spheres of responsibility and as a consequence want different things for the child. (Powell, 1989, p. 20)

In the past 50 years, however, there have been changes in how schools and families have viewed each other. Because of a developing awareness of the importance of the bridge between home and school, schools have reached out to families and families have pressed to be heard in schools.

Educators have described and defined the differences in the roles and spheres of responsibility of teachers and parents (Katz, 1984; Getzels, 1974). Figure 1 depicts the framework developed by Katz (1984).

Figure 1 describes the distinctions in parent and teacher roles. In Katz's model, the teacher's role is specific to schooling, while the parent's is universal in all aspects of the child's life. Teachers are responsible for all the children for a specific period confined to the school setting, and therefore the teacher's role is more objective, detached, and rational, using insights, techniques, and abilities to support each child. The teacher's role is shaped by professional knowledge about "all children." Parental relationships, on the other hand, are shaped by their own child for whom they are responsible 24 hours a day and are likely to demonstrate intense partiality, attachment, and even irrationality in their interactions about their own child (Katz, 1984). Given the difference in roles, it is critical to look for the meeting points as partnerships are developed.

Influences on How the Parent and Teacher Roles Are Enacted

Confusion results when teacher and parent roles become ambiguous. The first challenge is to make public some of the parameters of the role enactment patterns. The second challenge is to figure out how to use those parameters as a bridge to effective parent-teacher partnerships. Therefore, it is essential to look at some of the forces that influence how the roles are enacted.

Parents' Role Construction

How parents view their role in relation to school also affects parent-teacher relationships. Parents' role construction may be described as parent focused, school focused, and/or partnership focused. In the parent-focused construct, parents consider that they have primary responsibility for their children's educational outcome. In the school-focused construct, parents feel the school is primarily responsible for the children's educational outcome, and in the partnership-focused construct, parents believe that teacher and parent working together are responsible (Reed, Jones, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2000). It seems apparent that how parents interact will vary based upon the construct the parent holds.

Teachers' Role Construction

Teachers' role construction has developed primarily outside the formal education arena and is less clearly documented in the literature but is evident in the field. Teachers may view their role as parent focused, school focused, and/or partnership focused. The parent-focused view evolved out of the parent-cooperative movement. In that movement, teachers and parents worked side by side, empowering parents

Role Dimension	Parenting	Teaching
1. Scope of function	Diffuse and limitless	Specific and limited
2. Intensity of affect	High	Low
3. Attachment	Optimum attachment	Optimum detachment
4. Rationality	Optimum irrationality	Optimum rationality
5. Spontaneity	Optimum spontaneity	Optimum intentionality
6. Partiality	Partial	Impartial
7. Scope of responsibility	Individual	Whole group

Figure 1. Distinctions between parenting and teaching in their central tendencies on seven role dimensions (Katz, 1984).

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and giving parents teaching roles. This view is most prevalent in early childhood programs. The school-focused role reflects teachers who believe in an effective separation of roles and functions between home and school. This view is more typical in elementary schools and intensifies the older the child gets. The partnership-focus perspective, where family and school work cooperatively, is a more recent construct, evolving as the literature began to point to the significant benefits that accrue to children, parents, and teachers as a result of the partnership. As with parents, how the teachers interact will vary based upon the beliefs the teachers hold.

Teachers' and Parents' Efficacy Beliefs

In addition to how they construct their own understanding of role, teachers' and parents' sense of efficacy also influences what type of interactions they are likely to have (Reed, Jones, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2000). Research has shown us that teachers and parents with high efficacy levels are more likely to succeed in parent-teacher relationships (Garcia, 2000; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). On the one hand, teachers and parents who have had successful interactions with each other, observed or heard about others' successes, and/or felt that efforts were worthwhile are more likely to have that personal sense of efficacy (Garcia, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). On the other hand, teachers and parents may have "leftover anxieties" (Taylor, 1968, p. 272) from earlier experiences with schools that influence how effective they are likely to feel. Rebuilding the bridge for effective parent-teacher relationships may require different supports for those individuals.

From the parents' perspective, most have little choice in choosing a school. Many feel powerless to influence schools and are threatened by the authority of the school. Some feel that running the schools should be "left up to the experts" (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Greenberg, 1989). Some resist or are reluctant to participate because they worry about their family's privacy. Others find the school climate or school bureaucracy hard to deal with (Henry, 1996; Comer & Haynes, 1991). The lack of clarity about what to expect at meetings and conferences also poses a challenge for the relationship (Keyes, 1979; Lortie, 1975). For many apparently uninvolved parents, their school experience was not positive, and they may now feel inadequate in the school setting (Brown, 1989).

From the teachers' perspectives, some feel unappreciated by parents. They say that parents don't come to conferences or meetings, don't read the material they send home, and won't volunteer for school activities. Some teachers feel that parents seem to lack interest in what's going on with their children. Others describe parents as adversarial or apathetic, always a challenge (Galinsky, 1990; Hulsebosch & Logan, 1998; Langdon & Novak, 1998; Greenberg, 1989). In both teachers' and parents' cases, we do not know whether their lack of a sense of efficacy occurs because they have an adversarial point of view or they lack skills, or because there is a cultural division.

Teachers' and Parents' Expectations

Different expectations on the part of both teachers and parents may also affect the parent-teacher partnership. Often teachers and parents place different emphases on factors central to developing confidence in their relationship. For example, parents may emphasize teachers' knowledge and skills. They want teachers to know and care about teaching, about their children, and about communicating with them. Teachers have more confidence in parents who have similar ideas about teaching issues, and child-rearing practices, and who freely share important things about their children (Powell, 1998; Rich, 1998).

Teachers' and Parents' Personal Attributes

Closely related to roles and efficacy are personal attributes. According to the research, several characteristics appear to positively influence parent-teacher partnerships. The relationships are enhanced when teachers' personal attributes include warmth, openness, sensitivity, flexibility, reliability, and accessibility (Swick, 1992; Comer & Haynes, 1991). The partnerships are positively influenced when parents' personal attributes include warmth, sensitivity, nurturance, the ability to listen, consistency, a positive self-image,

personal confidence, and effective interpersonal skills (Swick, 1992). While neither teachers nor parents may have all these positive personal attributes, teachers, who are armed with this knowledge, may be more effective at bridging.

Teacher and Parent Communication

One of the categories of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1995) is communication. This communication includes teacher invitations, first meetings with parents, conferences, and adapting communication to meet the diverse needs of parents. Two aspects of communication, first meetings and teacher invitations, have significance because they influence how roles will be enacted as partnerships develop. First meetings with parents, often the first personal connection that is made, set the tone for the subsequent relationship, making it critical to be aware of issues of cultural styles in conversation, space, and eye contact. Research suggests that the teachers' invitations to parents are also a critical factor in promoting more extensive parent involvement.

Literature Review Summary

The research described above tells us that effective parent-teacher relations are founded on (1) the understanding of the unique elements of the parents' and teachers' roles and how they complement each other and (2) subsequent modifications of their roles growing out of negotiations that reflect the unique needs of both parent and teacher. In effective partnerships, parents and teachers educate each other during open two-way communication. Each point of view enlightens the other. "Mutually responsive relationships seem more likely to flourish if such programs focus more on the interconnectedness of parents and teachers through their mutual commitment to children and on exploring ways to enhance and celebrate this connectedness" (Sumsion, 1999).

If these effective partnerships are to develop, the literature also tells us to be cognizant of the factors described earlier and recognize (1) the diversity in teachers' and parents' cultures and values including their backgrounds, race, ethnic group, socioeconomic class, and educational level; (2) forces such as technology, workplace characteristics, and changing family structures; and (3) influences on teachers' and parents' enactment of their roles including how they construct their roles, their sense of efficacy, their expectations and personal attributes, and their communication styles.

Moving Toward a Theoretical Framework

In this portion of the paper, I have created a theoretical model that attempts to unite much of the literature reviewed above. I will use two different frameworks in presenting this model. The first is the ecological systems perspective, and the second comes from the social system perspective.

Ecological Systems Perspective

"The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). The ecological environment, according to this theory, consists of a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls. At the innermost level is the immediate setting containing the developing person. This microsystem concerns relations between the person and his or her immediate environment. The next circle, the mesosystem, represents the relation between the settings in which the developing person participates (e.g., work and home, home and school). The third level, the exosystem, refers to one or more settings that affect the person but do not contain the person (e.g., workplace or church). The final level, the macrosystem, refers to values, laws, and customs of the culture that influence all the lower orders (see Figure 2). Within this theoretical structure, there is interconnectedness both within and between the settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 8).

In Figure 3, I present the first part of my model by integrating the research on parent-teacher roles into the Bronfenbrenner model. The box to the left

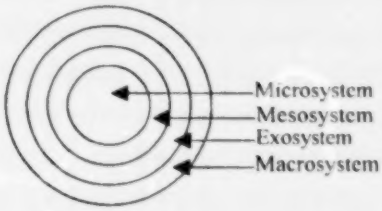

Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model.

represents all of the qualities of the teacher that have developed in the microsystem. The box to the right represents all of the qualities of the parent that have developed in the microsystem. The inner-most circle, the microsystem, represents the teacher-as-person or parent-as-person with all the factors described earlier—culture, values, role understanding, sense of efficacy, personality characteristics, expectations, communication skills, knowledge of the child or children—that have developed from their experiences

The second aspect of the model considers the significance of the child (Figure 4). The parent-teacher pairing occurs by assignment. Their common interest is the child. Though the child only appears in this figure within this proposed model, the child is a variable that is pervasive. How parent and teacher come together over their common interest in that child is influenced not only by the mitigating personal and social factors mentioned in Figure 2 but also by how they each interact with the child, and their feelings with regard to that child. Recall that in the role description the parent focuses on her child, and the teacher must view the child as an individual but also part of the class (Sumsion, 1999).

Social System Perspective

The third aspect of my model utilizes Getzels' social system perspective (Getzels, 1978). Just as the ecological perspective helps remind us of the complexity of the individuals, in this case the teacher and

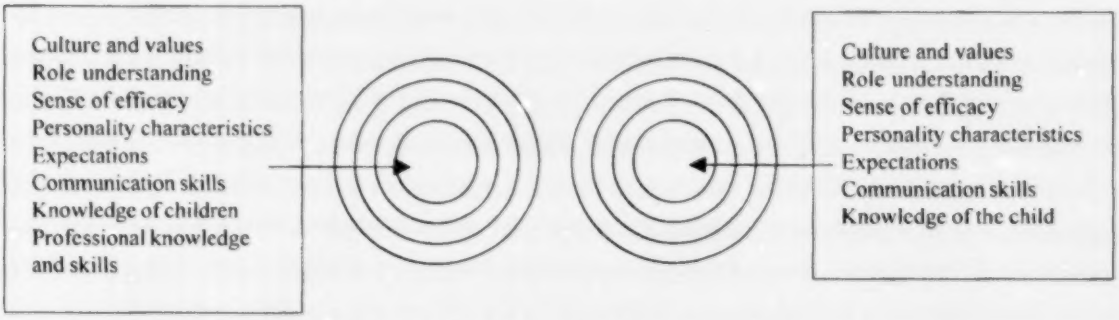

Figure 3. Ecology of the teacher and ecology of the parent.

including the present challenges to building and bridging the partnership above. The next circle represents the mesosytem where the adults interact within the school bringing what they have experienced with them. The two outer circles, exosystem and macrosystem, represent the societal influences of the more distant environments and contexts including workplaces, laws, and customs. This adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's model helps us to see the complexity of the teacher-as-person and the parent-as-person, and the skill that is required to bridge the differences that exist.

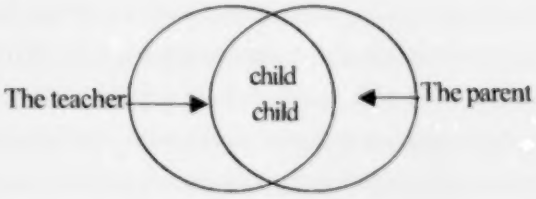

Figure 4. The child in the model.

the parent, a social system perspective helps us to understand the dynamic quality of the interaction between the participants and their impact on each other. Figure 5 shows Getzels' social system model.

Looking at Figure 5, the elements of the system include an institution with its roles and expectations, the normative dimension; and individuals with their personalities and dispositions, the personal dimension. Behavior is a result of the interplay between the role and expectations and the personalities of the individuals involved.[2] Real individuals occupy roles, and each individual stamps a role with a unique style.

relationship. Looking at Figure 5, the top row of social system sets out the influences of the institution, role, and expectations. The teacher's role is specific, detached, rational, intentional, impartial, and focusing on the whole group, while the parent's role is diffuse, attached, irrational, spontaneous, partial, and individual (Katz, 1984). The bottom row sets out the influences of the individual personality and dispositions. Here the focus is the teacher's or parent's construction of role, sense of efficacy, expectations, personal attributes, and communication skills. A parent may be parent focused, school focused, and/or partnership focused (Reed, Jones, Walker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2000);

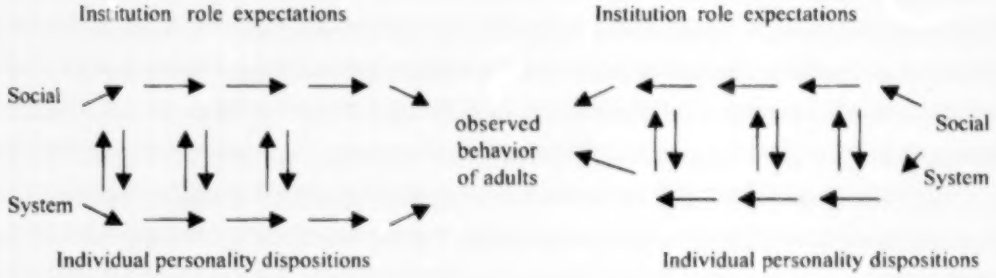

Figure 5. Getzels' social system.

The teacher and parent meet together as adults, about their common interest the child, each bringing their life experience and all the forces that affect them to a social system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The social system provides the framework for the interaction. In the partnership, defined as the social system in this case, the factors described above influence the

and the teacher may be parent focused, school focused, and/or partnership focused (Garcia, 2000; Swick, 1992; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Institution is not referred to, although the institution and its characteristics play a role, particularly in what kinds of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995) will be promoted.[3] This interpretation of Getzels' model high-

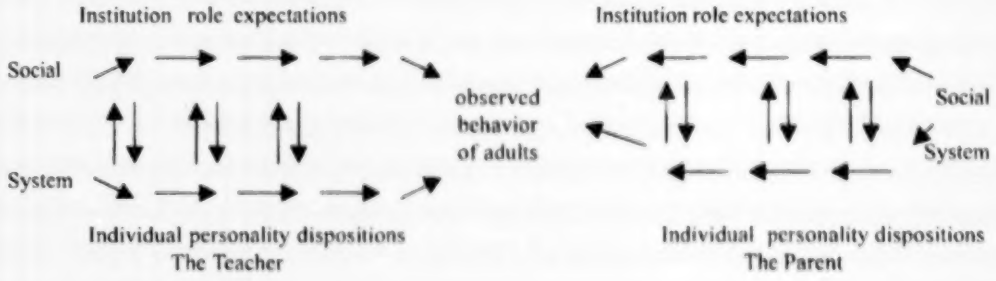

Figure 6. The teacher and parent in the social system.

lights the dynamic and complex nature of the parent-teacher partnership and the importance of considering the interplay among all the elements.

The Role of Communication in the Theoretical Framework

Epstein's typology includes six major aspects of parent involvement. In Figure 7, I have created a graphic to show the significance of communication in relation to the other five categories. As noted earlier, two aspects of communication, first meetings with parents and teachers' invitations, play a crucial role in influencing how parent-teacher partnerships will develop. As discussed above, communication skills are part of the personal dimension of the social system. However, a separate figure has been created to accentuate the importance of that communication to bridging, leading to initial effective parent-teacher partnerships as well as promoting more extensive parent involvement as characterized by Epstein's typology (Epstein, 1995).

teachers can view events from more than their own perspective. Working within the framework may help teachers consider their attitudes about the value of parent-teacher partnership, look at its construct, and monitor their responses to individual situations.

Incorporating the Theoretical Framework into Teacher Education

We know that "teachers' collaborative relations with parents and work in a family context do not come about naturally or easily" (Powell, 1998, p. 66). From the very first teaching assignment, many teachers find themselves struggling in working with families. Some have ethical concerns; others just lack knowledge, skills, and strategies (Powell, 1989). Professionals have repeatedly challenged the field to provide both teacher and administrator training in working with parents (Powell, 1998; Epstein, 1989). In the past few years, teacher education programs have responded by developing a range of activities to accomplish that preparation (de Acosta, 1996; French, 1996; Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1996; Morris et al., 1996; Silverman,

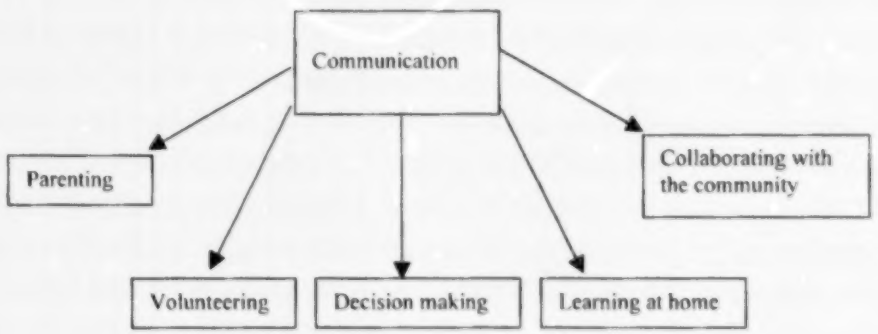

Figure 7. The importance of communication.

In Figure 8, I present the full model. My hope is that teachers will use the model as a way of thinking and visualizing (1) their approach to the parent-teacher partnership and (2) their reflection about interactions that have taken place. The process does not dampen spontaneity but rather provides distance, so that

Welty, & Lyons, 1996). This theoretical framework, a systemic model that considers complexity, dynamics, and interrelationships (Senge, 1990), would also make an important contribution towards preparing teachers to work more effectively with the diverse parents they now encounter in schools.

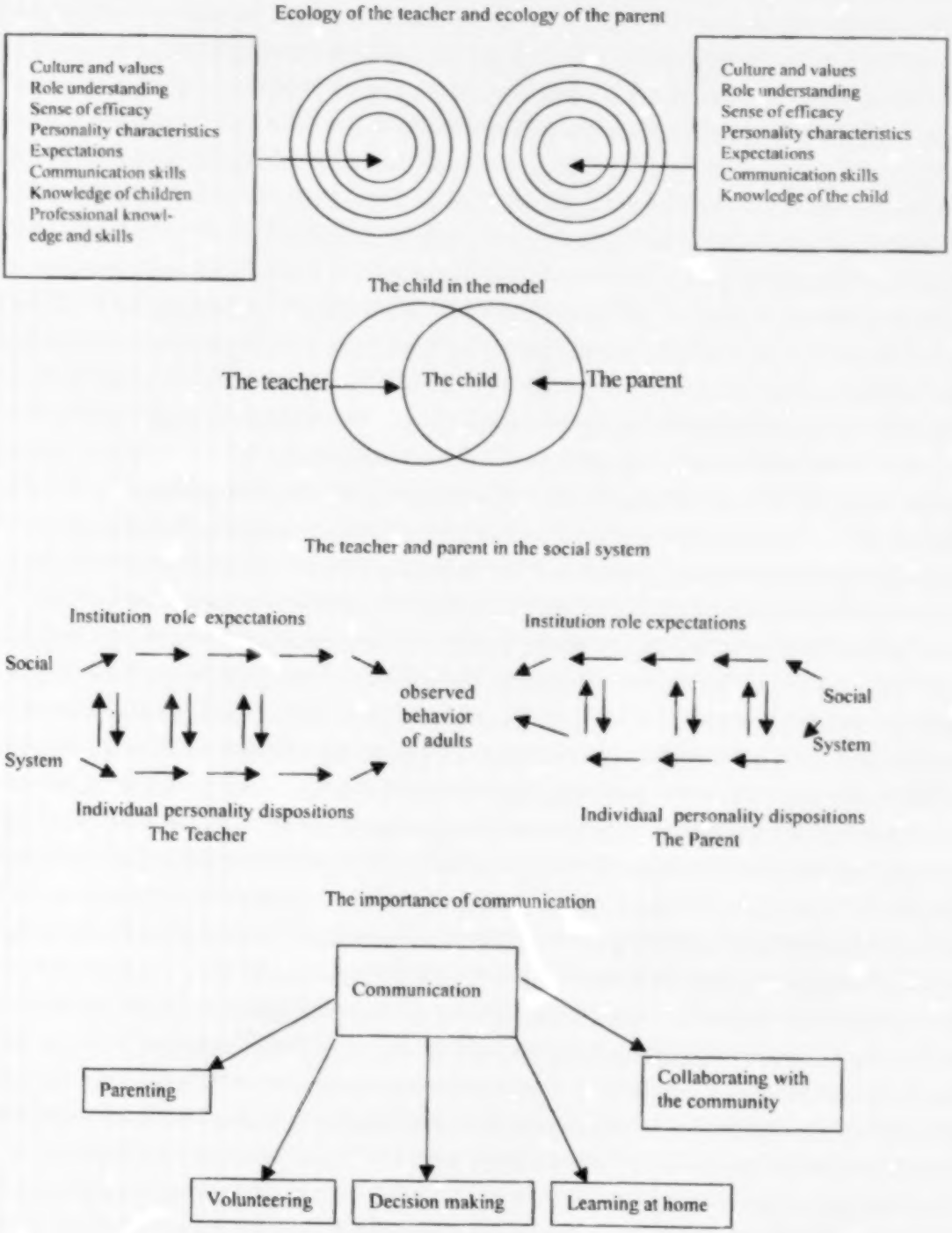

Figure 8. A theoretical framework for parent-teacher partnerships.

Notes

[1]Though I don't discuss the values of family/school relationships in this article, it is important to share the values that accrue to parents, teachers, and children with both parents and teachers. There are many articles to use as sources (Coleman, 1997; Kieff & Wellhousen, 2000; Thorkildsen & Scott Stein, 1998; Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Becher, 1986; Lightfoot, 1978; Hymes, 1974; Greenberg, 1989).

[2]There are the elements of communities and values in Getzels' social system, and they affect the institution and the individual as both affect the communities and values. I have omitted discussing them for now because Bronfenbrenner's ecology takes care of them and I want to keep this first framework less complicated for teachers.

[3]Gemeinschaft and Gesselschaft are two sociological terms that may be used to describe institutions. Gemeinschaft refers to local community and Gesselschaft the larger society. If the institution, school in this case, is more Gemeinschaft, it is more likely to relate to family/school/community partnerships and collaborations. If the institution is more Gesselschaft, it is more likely to be corporate in nature and likely to foster family school separation. For a full discussion of this aspect of the institution, see Cibulka and Kritek (1996), Henry (1996), and Sergiovanni (1996).

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